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Phoenix Suites

by

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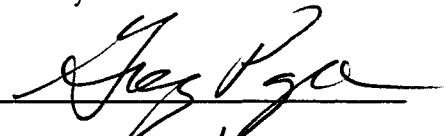
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Contents

To the Magician's Tomb, an Ars Poetica / 1

I.

You Must Drive to Phoenix / 3

My Father's Harvest / 4

Phoenix Suites / 5

II.

How Phoenix, Arizona Names Her Dead / 11

The Radish Garden / 12

Drinking in the Daytime / 14

Zopilote Love Poem / 16

Flagstaff Aubade / 17

New Rails / 18

A Child's Piano Lesson and Dust Storm / 19

III.

Looking for Federico / 22

The Lover of Snakes / 23

Two Letters / 24

The Song of Saint John of the Cross / 26

Jorge Luis Borges Falling Down the Stairs / 27

Antonio Machado and I / 29

Antonio Machado and the Trees / 30

IV.

The Quail / 32

Cazorla / 33

Semana Santa / 34

Feverscape / 35

Swimmers / 36

Thirsty Ghazal / 41

Moonrise at Wukoki / 42

When the Water Leaves / 43

To the Magician's Tomb, an Ars Poetica

I will give you the landmarks,
 and if you should find
 the magician's tomb the Sinagua built
 somewhere in the maze
of cinder cones and scrub,
 keep quiet about it.
 His talismans and skeleton
 are in boxes in Washington.
Only you would want to know
 the way to a robbed grave.
 Find a slow chain
 of rail cars pushing on
beyond the withering
 tennis court.
 Follow their clattering
 shadows and graffiti,
through town,
 past the curio shops,
 live bate and ammo,
 the Napa Auto
and the Mormon church.
 You will reach
 a frontage road.
 Take it as far east
as you can stand—
 power lines will hum above you
 until ponderosas
 dwindle to junipers
until junipers dwindle
 to salt bush—
 until the sun ends
 and a gas lamp appears
in the clouded window
 of a derelict school bus.
 The man selling
 ersatz Kachina dolls
will be the first to tell you
 he is your last landmark.
 Where he carves his bauble
 is the best place
to step off the plateau
 and begin.

I

You Must Drive to Phoenix

I'm sorry. Turn off your air conditioner. I know it's humid and the drivers are angry. Roll down a window, remove the face plate of your radio and throw it into a canal. Talk radio won't help you now. There is a way to understand one wild secret: I'm asking you to sleep

in a vacant lot in the center of a city. To rest on the belly of wilderness, you have to lie on bull-head thorns that poke through a dead softball diamond. Find

a field where cotton and alfalfa won't grow, no matter how much water is pressed down upon them. Only a backstop twists and rusts where sports and grass failed. In a hall of the San Carlos Hotel, refer to an aerial picture of this place. It shows the faintly dug creases of the Hohokam who grew corn and tepary beans. You must sleep where their water wouldn't cross, a small dry square between mountains. Canals still give it a wide berth. Cattle tear their hides in cat-claw acacia at the shake of a rattle. You have

only a rusty backstop and a raggedy pomegranate tree to go on, but don't sleep near these characters. They are bad companions, false ambassadors, visitors like yourself. They have worn their welcome to rust and tattered fruit. Ants make better bed fellows. Watch the swifts

perch in the holes when the metal cools at dusk. An elf owl will make a racket blinking in the branches of moon-lit, gutted pomegranates. Along an avenue, park and lose your hubcaps. Leave your car unlocked, and into a row of dead trees enter.

My Father's Harvest

As my father died, he tended to the strangest obsessions.
I found him in the garden instead of bed.
Shooting gophers, he'd stand in slippers, blue
checkered robe, 16 gage low on the shoulder,
a Burpee seed catalogue pressed under an arm.
He dragged the drooling desert hose on to the peas
and forgot to take pills, or at night when the beat

of his slippers troubled him, when the dog's slow
collar moved along the tile, when it couldn't
lick where it stung, fire arrived at my window.

As my father died, he let the thrush pick the cat,
and the dog's arthritic hip worked through the bleak
afternoon doorways, the side of the house
where the bottlebrush bloomed outside my room,
where the wasps had attached a nest beneath the roof.
They had a field day on the dog's hide
and made him twitch. God knows why.

As my father died, he touched a torch to the eaves
where wasps had built a city of drifting anger,
where, late on a school night, I put a face
to the red pane and watched their quick wings

turn on them like angels made of hair
slow to find the ground. The side of my father's
checkered shoulder and face were held in a light
I thought set aside for the lighting of candles,
not the hive girdled in flames, the strange flower,
an omega gardenia afloat in his glasses, where his eyes burned,
transfixed and pleased with his handy work.

Phoenix Suites

*By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,
From there the wind comes and blows over the world.
By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,
From there clouds come and rain falls over the world.*

A desert O-o'dam salt chant.

I.

Imagine the first tired horses in the Salt River Valley and
their last legs falling through grass as high as a Spanish bridle.

Our fathers' prayers and songs spun out over the waters are lost;
the desert has devoured them like old ball courts and beetle-polished bones.

Cicadas grow louder in the hills surrounding the house,
and like coyote or worry, it could be a lone singer or a swarm.

What has the helicopter found to make it scour the same stretch
of Indian School Road— the engine and light crashing through the palms.

A construction worker finds a shell the Hohokam patterned with bands,
villages inside valleys, desert worlds inside worlds. Forgotten lines travel inside his palm.

Is there something old in us that wants to dig holes and fill them?
To attract the dead, dig a trench in the lawn and fill it with oxblood and mescal.

I don't know where I'm from-- a flood plain, a warning, a family tree,
the lines in my grandfather's hands— , and the shells testify to this.

II.

I've taken out a map to speculate where on the Verde River the divers found
the hermit's body. On his desk, spider webs and an old mask— the hemisphere of a face.

The Central Arizona Project, the canal, the water gossamer Phoenix hangs by,
is hemmed in with chain link warnings: no swimming, no fishing, patrolled by aircraft.

Camping by the old mines, I am startled out of my bag to grope for my glasses.
Wild donkeys, descendants of failed endeavor, are laughing at the stars.

He hiked with a shepherd's crook, and led me to mariposa lilies, to ruins
along volcanic saddles, to rings of saguaro fruit we picked with clumsy poles.

The ruins nestled in the rocky hills that ring the valley must have been
a lonely and sleepless promontory. One tired eye was always on the water.

The dead here enter a world choked in old mesquite: sooty survivors,
whose roots touch hundreds of rocky feet, touch caliche. Touch the water table.

III. *Palimpsest*

Only some of the story is hidden: the old irrigation buried beneath sewers
and avenues poke through the dirt. Phoenix keeps pace with its skeleton.

She is trying to hide on Indian School Road late at night with a wet towel
on her head, and she dreams of ether and a good sleep on the bottom of a canal.

How did we get here? The teeth of the spillway are full of tricycles. Red lights
shoo aircraft away from South Mountain. On-ramps lead to dusty oblivion.

Take me to where you were born, the arroyo turned orchard turned office space.
They have started the foundation. Bring a blanket. We'll descend into the hole and floodlights.

The wilted man in the parking booth takes my money, lets me out of the structure.
When we drive, we obey. All night, lanes converge. Horizons scatter— we obey.

I've been reading the birds: a trio of Harris' hawks hunt the lap dog. A turkey vulture
heaves a sigh in the violet tufts of jacaranda trees in the gated community.

Old creases emerge in the desert floor. The plane pushes through a dust storm,
and the swimming pools are ersatz stones set in the temple door.

IV.

*Open the dam, flood the river valley, float for us a resort, we want
an arena, we want a riverboat rez casino. We want the Lucky Squaw.*

The O-o'dam trekked across the Sonoran Desert to gather salt from the gulf.
A people without lakes, rivers, or brooks, prayed and waded into the waves.

The drive-through lube is a hole in the ground the car rolls over,
and the man with the grease gun dreams about worker's compensation.

In the shade of the bottlebrush, a mocking bird turns an eye to me
and opens its beak. I've forgotten what I wanted to say.

A line of cars stretches from Baseline Road to the Sea of Cortez, and we
have no reason to gather salt. Nothing to tell the sea foam.

When I hear my name out loud for the first time in weeks, I am given
an air filter. Wheels and axles crash through a world of lubricants and belts.

The surgeon forgets my name; the nurse shaves and marks the correct leg.
In a stranger's hands I fall asleep and drop my keys. He may keep them.

The flash flood finds us. When it ends and leaves us with sunlight over the resorts
and avenues, the stranded cars shimmer in the current like coins in a well.

V.

Northern, soothsayer skies. Black Mesa coal is burning,
pushing water uphill to trickle through the circuits of Phoenix.

66 pounds per cubic foot, roots probing the calcite depths,
mass of weighty thorns, the ironwood is still related to the pea.

No one is running to the mission to pray inside the adobe walls;
the weathered Jesuit bone settles in the scrub and dirt.

The neighborhood sleeps on hot pavement. Searchlights badger
a rock named Praying Monk. One climber falls; another holds on.

A storm jars me from sleep, and curtains of dust take
the White Tank Mountains from the horizon in one gulp.

3000 gallons a minute. If you walk far enough and listen,
water will begin to prophesy in the liquefied slurry of crushed coal.

Rolling blackouts. What haven't we bent to our will? The storm
is spreading like oil, and power lines beget power lines beget power ...

II

How Phoenix, Arizona Names Her Dead

On the corner of Bell Road and 19th Avenue,
behind the glass and frames that hold the glass,
inside the rusted grates of swamp coolers
breathing life into the buildings, the dead
are not within eyeshot. One glass building
is named Cadillac Chiropractic, and silver guns
wait for homes beneath the smeared countertops
of a pawnshop named Tough Luck Pawn.

On the jukebox a slow ranchero tuba takes its time,
and the man singing with the tuba is shameless
about what he would do if he found Mariana alone.
But this man has been dead for years. I forget his name.

Gabriel Celaya says to name something
is to summon it from a great distance,
and as I gaze into the onions and jalapenos
on the dish, I want to say your name
and rive dark meat from the bone, but I say
Phoenix, Arizona, and the tuba slowly trots
in the buckling heat.

The adult boutique is named Paradise.
A horse track in the desert is named Turf Paradise,
and the motel that has been converted
into a church is still named Desert Breeze.

The last time you said my name,
we took a room there. The one window,
crowded with insects and screens,
overlooked the canal. We made love slowly
in the heat of the day and listened
to the cicadas and traffic until we grew
tired of our bodies and of how our names
had become little sounds we fired at the walls
and forgot. As if we had known each other.

I should cross Bell Road as the city's token pedestrian,
100 degrees in the shade, the wilted car lot flags
waving at vacant upholstery, and I should kneel
in the sanctuary that used to be a honeycomb
of small carpeted rooms. The man
with hooks for arms who looped us our key
will be rubbing a vacuum over the altar.
In a pew two boys will listen to a police scanner
babble numbers. From the empty church office,
a television at full volume will call roll
for the missing and will name every name.

The Radish Garden

Sunday morning, my father is yelling in a voice reserved for when I make mistakes, for when I feed the dog pork bones or when I leave a sprocket set scattered in the rain. *Get out here, boy. Quick.* I am barefoot, running across bullhead thorns to the chicken wire fence I had helped him build. He is bent over in the garden with his wrists in the ground. A brown radish, split and thick as his arm, is between his hands in the soil. As I run up-- the soles of my feet peppered with thorns-- he says, *Watch!* and pulls the fat radish from its grip.

Death--the quick taste
of a bitter and split root
left too long in the earth.

Summer, my father introduces me to his mistress, and my mother begins to bury herself in the needle work and red earth of Oak Creek Canyon. I ask him what he does when he goes to work, and two doors swing open: there, beneath powerful fans, lights, and eager young doctors, lies my first corpse-- a brown man with frizzy gray hair. I am nine years old. The saw cuts through the skull like butter. My father brings the heart on a board, places his finger on spots where it has failed. *Boy, tell me what you're thinking right now.*

By a fluke, an owl
over the pitch lot--
where's the light for such shadows?

In the studio of his mistress, two men share a narrow love seat with a boa constrictor coiled between their arms and necks, weaving them together in a shimmering and patterned band. Against the walls lean paintings with baffling titles: one, a green murk beneath a tuft of scrub she calls *Soldier*; another, a bloodied sliver of moon mingled with starfish, conches, and jellyfish she names *Constance*. There's no place to sit, and I grow tired under the confused paintings and try not to watch the couple wound inside the snake. The men drink milk from Pearl Beer glasses we used to have at home. *Don't tell Mama we came here, and What do think of the two men playing with each other? Do you like girls or boys?*

Cicadas in a storm
by the gravel road
sing infinite and brief names.

After my father's funeral, I am watering the garden and wearing Sunday school slacks, without a shirt, socks, or shoes. I drag the hose over a shoulder, and ants stream from the hose onto my back and neck. They storm my vacant shoes. I've flung a collared shirt onto the sticky leaves of the summer squash where the ants enter and exit pockets and sleeves. Their angry ant minds are baffled by my absence. The house outside the garden fills with people, and the strike of hard heels on distant kitchen tiles enters the chicken wire like dust on butter beans and plants heavy with split

and dull tomatoes. I close the gate, leave the running hose to hang from the arms of a scarecrow.
The vegetables go begging on the vine.

Persimmons, pristine
and high in the tree—
keepsakes for an empty house.

The family flies to Honduras for a wedding, and the plane rattles and sinks into a valley of green decay, low thunderheads and ditched cars. In the seats around me, my brothers, mother, aunts worry and hold hands. The plane jerks and sinks, and they repeat: *we're ok, we're ok, we'll be ok..* A stranger in the seat next to me falls apart about a baby daughter in Tulsa. Beyond the wing approach trees for which I have no name. I take out pictures of the family I brought to show the new in-laws. The photographs shake in my hand: my baby face covered with sand; the brothers jump motorcycles in the desert; smiles and cans of beer surround a table 1979; my mother squints in the sun of her wedding; my father stands alone on some Mexican shore as the light from the Sea of Cortez holds him in the frame. His square hands cradle a gnarled head of driftwood, and as he stares into it—the ground rising now beyond the quivering wing—his white hair reaches out to the wind.

Dark cedars moan,
and a grackle on the lam
pauses for their voices.

Drinking in the Daytime

The young man is splashing cold water on his face.
Mirrors brighten inside his body.

The day is submersed in oil, viscous copper—a distortion
that buckles the air and men's room and old piano

that is locked, but you can look at it and hear
someone coughing, someone saying

sober up all you want, no one is going anywhere.
Tengo sueno, a girl says, which means

she is either dreaming or
bored with him, and soon, her heels are firing

away from us into the street, out to the workers
in their holes, to their laughter and laying

of fiber optics. One failure usurps another
like mandibles missing teeth, vacant skulls

above us that ripple and grimace
among our chrome reflections and a local

news story about thirst and heatstroke,
and hidden in our rapt expressions, there is

the conviction that nothing can keep us
from swimming to the surface of this place and rising

through the pressed tin ceiling
into some lake world we have been dreaming about

where dimly lit cabins along the shore harbor
other lives, where we are up to our necks

in a voyeur's warm water and gazing into
far away rooms, where we can leave

the agitated fire inside the glass words,
CERVEZA ESPECIAL

and leave the orifice of the puma's skull, the cracked
and fragile sobs of the man three stools down,

the rubber grapes, socketless fathering only dust,
the bottles saying Creme de Cacao and Blue Guracao,

the x-ray of someone swallowing water on the screen
with laboring tongue, whose bones

are no more important
than gossamer or smoke or the old man

wandering into the yucca to vanish or electric spades
and hearts turning

poor blue guracao inside
the machines along the wall.

Zopilote Love Poem

Walking in the wet creosote bush all morning
we come to the turkey vultures—
a purging of what is tangled inside us—

where we vanish into each other,
into a savoring and slipping of sharp knots

beneath our skin—hungry noises
we once knew as our names.

Zopilotes,
cathartes aura, breaths of persistent air,

hesitate and hang in shallow arcs—
their circles awkward and tilting.

Winged reflections crowd puddles in the trail
as new comers arrive and confer

like monks in the limbs.
Nothing is completely lost

of the bull on its side—
felled by lighting,

one horn
buried in the roots of a juniper,

its black flanks swaying at their tugs,

in a desert now blooming
with their small and naked heads.

Flagstaff Aubade

Leave now. The snow floats through the open door
and vanishes on your body like our name.

Ponderosas cling to the frozen weight, dawn
anonymous as chainlink. Freight traffic
sweeps cinders into our eyes.

A train muscles its way through town without you
and won't stop until New Mexico. Smeared and automatic
doors have shut behind us, and hollow point rounds
mingle with pills at the table.

Take the truck
and prozac winter with you.

The cup is on its side,
and the window behind your head is an angry knot
of power lines, transmitters, and sunlight.

You have cleaned your gun. Go.
The black tide is pulling out.

New Roils

roil (roil), v.t. [[rust, robigo, akin to French rouiller, ruber, RED]] 1. To render (water, wine, etc.) turbid by stirring up sediment. —syn. 2. Annoy, fret, ruffle, exasperate, provoke, rile, vex: *to be roiled by delay* [P]—v.i. to be agitated. 3. v.i. To make (a house) cloudy, muddy, or unsettled by stirring: *The storm blew open the doors and roiled the house.* 4. FIG. To render (a house, household, family, etc.) cloudy, muddy, or unsettled with an intent to annoy, fret, ruffle, exasperate, provoke. *The drunk father blew in from Mexico and roiled the house with the unexpected storm.*

roil² (roil), v.t. 1. To gather (child, clothes, keys) and flee. 2. (Americanism) to disturb or disquiet; irritate; vex (neighbors) by screaming in the front yard of a house. *The father and mother roiled the neighbors shortly before dawn.*

roil³ (roil), v.t. 1. To move (child, self, clothes) to a trailer home in a canyon by a creek. 2. (Americanism) To fire bottle rockets into a creek or stream. 3. -adj. *Ichth.* To be fired upon by a bottle rocket. *The roiled trout suffered a case of the nerves.*

roil⁴ (roil), v.i. 1. To fall off a cliff in San Carlos, Mexico. 2. v.i. To wake up in a Guaymas hospital with a head shaved and stitched up like a baseball. 3. To wake up in a Guaymas hospital convinced that nuns singing in the dark are two tents on a camping trip where one's absent family is having a good time. 4. (Americanism) To regret. 5. [Now Rare] To repent. *In the hospital bed and darkness of the nun's hymn, his father roiled and roiled and roiled.*

A Child's Piano Lesson and Dust Storm

Dust and clouds
 are claiming
what the teacher

asked you to repeat last week:
 small sounds
you must find

among the many—
 arpeggios maybe
that should leap

 up from the lacquer
on cue, but you have only
 the instrument,

foreign and vast
 before you, alkali flats—
a wasteland the faces

 of student and teacher
must float in: you wait there
 on the bench

until her fingers
 find the dark keys
you forgot. You listen carefully

 to the angry cinnamon
gallop of gum
 in her mouth and

blood shooting in your ears.
 The wind is
trying to lift

 the house again,
lose ends like trash
 or even tiles

head skyward, and you
 would very much
like to be a plastic bag

 above the houses and trees.
Motes hang
 before the windows,

waiting for you

on the stand
is sheet music

you don't understand—
it is your turn
to fidget

before the keys again
and try to remember
what you have heard,

but the ants are caged
inside the abacus,
and the muted hammers

will not fall for you.
Flats and sharps
vanish into the drapes,

into the body
of a sleeping dog.
A pot murmurs

on the stove; the storm
dazzles a bush—
you hear every note.

III

Looking for Federico

Parque Federico Garcia Lorca, Granada

If a gray mare were here to lower her head
into the arms of a wounded rider,
and if from some distant promontory
officers of the Guardia Civil were raising
binoculars to stone faces, and if you
found yourself privy to a young man
weeping into his hat, you would
be either in the world of elegy
or among the curios they sell at the gate,
each plate a shimmering cliché of the poet
smiling in a plaza or playing piano for Dali,
Romance Sonambulo's refrain in gold
across a cigarette lighter, sixty wounded riders
loving the green, but in the center, the house
is a wind-polished bone one could overlook
for the roses that crowd the paths
and well-tended rosemary, and the people stroll
in the gravel after a siesta, yawning,
answering tiny phones in their coats.
From the poet's doorstep you follow
them in their circles as if they were workers
grinding a mill—these citizens content
to turn left or right until the light narrows
and they must leave. You may search
the wrought iron if you want. Is there a trace,
a *duende* of circumstance? A boy
is planting bougainvillea, and as he
turns the thorny strands, the lavender
blossoms begin waving to you
like the gloved hands of children.

The Lover of Snakes

For Geoffrey Platts

For weeks I've been trying to evoke
the lover of rattlesnakes,
monkey grass, mariposa lilies
in the rocky basalt above the canyon,
packrats in the yucca outside his cabin,
jojoba --more nutlike & bitter than berry--,
the zone tailed hawk as much
as the turkey vulture it copies,
the zopilote nest he found
in northern Mexico, saguaro fruit
we picked with polls he took
from land surveyors, lichen, elf owls, moss,
what's left of the humpback chub,
the desert five spot, a small spring I swore
I would show no one (where blackberries
and a diamondback thrived) catclaw
acacia, creosote, ant lions, the tarantula
that paid us no mind in the trail,
gnat catchers, Harris' hawks he hoped
no falconer would tame, mesquite,
bark scorpions, the jeweled and docile
gila monster's slow and secretive ways,
scrub oak,
words-- precise as coyote scat
full of berries and prickly pear (thorns and all)--
atop a pile of stones,
the small coyote he saw leap
from a juniper branch in the middle of a storm
(the air around him--rich with ions, lightning, and lusty plants--
was delicious, he said),
and *Madrecita*, little mother,
Earth--to whom he said aloud,
thank you.

Two Letters

(The Poet and Photographer)

Dear Mark, I can see
the wash of peach
light that might

be the flower girl's breast
or the firm hemispheres
of the swimmer's back, and

I recognize the delicate
and pedaled shadows
gathering leaf-like as...

what's the use? You
could have taken this picture
through a sandwich bag,

or from space. Somehow
you have rigged your Nikon
to an electronic microscope.

Forgive me, but is this
a picture of your lover
or the magnified surface

of an egg?
Your friend and poet,
Miles.

enclosure

Dear Miles— Thanks
 for your honesty
 and poem, "Midnight Snack
with Lorca," but as much
 as I enjoy the skull
 in the ewe's milk,
the harlequin cats
 going at it
 in the walls, and even
your hidden monks
 arming themselves
 in the pharmacy—
the monozygotic moon

and hobbled pony
in the rosemary
throw me
for a loop.
The lavender gloved boys
are neither menacing
nor visceral,
and that's no way
to describe a flower
in the wind! I just don't get it.
Munch crackers
in moonlight
with some other martyr
for a change.
I'd be happy
to show you
what bougainvillea
looks like.
Yours,
Mark.

The Song of Saint John of the Cross

Water I cannot bring myself to drink,
windowless privy of thriving flies, light
from a slit three fingers wide, I must eat
what the vicar's man brings me. From the wall,
a cat in heat howls, pacing the yard,
and calms herself for the crier of hours.

I drift and waste in howling shifts, the hours
called out like names of the dead. Dare I drink
what the vicar brings? Hemlock in the yard
pitching spades across the page, steals the light
from the breviary. Words fade to walls
and dull echo. Canticle droplets eat

through the niter seep. Rise now and eat
the miserere, the canonical hours
called out, my voice cracking against the walls
of friars. The cuts of their canes say, "drink
from the gall, brother"-- refectory light
gutters like swallow shadow in the yard.

Still, the bride song beckons me from the yard,
and in the whisper of the cane that eats
me, she is pleading: *where are you, my light,*
my little Seneca. Like seeds, the hours
fall— my fruit is left writhing with drinking
wasps. I can hear her howling from the walls

until the friars pitch slop, and the walls
reck and fall silent. Unwinding the yards
of thread my gaoler gave me, I must drink
from the mind the lover's talk. I must eat
their clusters of grapes gathering like hours,
and scrawl in the privy's derelict light,

for she is calling me into the light
to lower a stone, and measure the wall,
to loosen the bolts, and tie the sheets for hours
in braids, so I may climb into the yard
and leave the Vicar General to eat
my wondrous knot of rhymes, *for I have drunk*

his wine and milk. Eat, friends and drink until
you are drunk with love. Light slips from the cell,
the yard, the walls, and with it, I will follow.

Jorge Luis Borges Falling Down the Stairs

National Library, Buenos Aires, 1969

Destiny has its way
with Borges, cruel symmetry in repetition
to forever elaborate useless ways,
all the way
to the bottom of the cellar. This is
a pure diversion of my will, a way
through laborious cosmology, to exult
in yet another circular solitude.
The ineffable core is always solitude,
illusion of pain in mirrors, the way
the ceaseless stairs offer but a slight change in the series
now and then, a sharp turn in the well, the series
resumed, some feeble artifice of Borges lost in a series
in a wool suit, way-
ward limbs straining toward the repetition—
to halt the spectral series
of collisions, the stairs and Borges,
to forever elaborate the series
of jars and pitching dramas, is a series
within series of death and an a rethinking
of history's landfill of metaphors.
Stop thinking and the stairwell may come to an end; think,
and the steps stretch toward oblivion, your solitude
complete. The core is always solitude, always, always
Borges falls. What does Borges fall to?—some perfection
of a series
created by the world it bounds, a dizzying idiosyncrasy
no doubt—the only place where all places are, solitude
seen from every angle without overlap with each way
exulting in another,
Borges falls toward Borges, who, in falling solitude
takes the shape of a man pointing in ecstasy
both to heaven and to earth, a spiraling
gesture showing the lower world's dark solitude
is the map and mirror of the higher. The thinking
Borges moves toward the tornada inside a thinking
and signifying Aleph, whose thinking
conjures all stars, all lamps, pure ecstasy
without confusion begetting
stars, minerals, plants, every series,
mutation, every secret and property, thinking
no more stairs, Borges—but
alkaline flats, planes, pampa, a single mattress, a way
out of this Shih Hwang Ti of stairs, a short way

to the bottom of this cycle,
some two bit fruit of delirium, some ecstatic

grackle numb on berries is no delirious ecstasy
as it flies into a mirror image. I have become
the letters in a closed book, an ecstasy
of iotas and dots, the characters lost in
happenstance, but the stories gather in the solitude
of the binding, and they keep Borges falling
as one in vertigo, oneiric tigers bounding in ecstatic
talk down the well. This series
of forking rivulets, eternal and tied series
of actual and ersatz stars,
that a nearby accordion might
grind its way into the labyrinth of Borges' ear, O be
done with me.

Antonio Machado and I

after Del Camino XXII

Inside desire, the paths
are tangled & mixed--
they can't be trusted,
but we travel

as the pony's bright fly
ends its majestic life adrift
in the folds

of night flowers. Black gates
of the park pitch
shadows at the calm.

I can't tell memory
from bauble,
stars from destiny,
the runt of the litter
from puppets.
I recognize the pilgrim

in so much as he
travels in the shadow
of a spent old man,
and somewhere, there's a
fragrant turn in the road,

where the terrible
takes its course,
maybe half goat— horns strung

with roses, set in stubborn
motion. Maybe far off broods

a dispute, personified
in the mind
like a finger of smoke

in the olive groves.
One certainty, Antonio,
where we walk
is bitter.

Antonio Machado and the Trees

Baeza 1915

The poet is eavesdropping on the sycamores
at dusk. They talk with the copper light, the wind
they trap with long, knotted fingers--
their shapes racing against the chipped walls
of the village where he has banished himself at forty
to live with his mother, now that his child bride
has been two years in the grave. In the light
and chatter of the trees, the poet is resolved
to die teaching children French,
to live out what's left, years shipwrecked in a sea
of smoldering olive groves, the small pleasures
of regular verbs and nightfall in rural Spain.
He has only to read the gossip of the cruel trees,
their talk of the lost bride. *Leonor*, they say, how fragile
she was when they married, and how consumption
riddled her away from him. The sycamores know
there was so little left of her that he secretly wanted
to carry her coffin like a guitar case
against his chest, with neither company nor ceremony,
all the way to the grave. As the day fades, the trees
mutter in their ranks before the last light leaves them.
The conversation is over. The poet, ashamed,
exposed on his hill, shivers
among the silent arches, the dark plaza,
where lions bite down on the brass rings of the doors.

IV

The Quail

Dusk is swollen with old stories, and behind the wheel
there is no remembering them. Sensors trick on
halogen lights. You leave your car
along the interstate and shuffle off the bright shoulder
into the arroyo where summer is over and cicadas
are sleeping, where the wellspring of coyote laughter—
sudden and kindred—sinks in. In the brambly watershed,

white thorn acacia and silence hold you with nettled hands.
Mesquite tufts fork like cracked alkali flats
against the sky. The feather bush is still and dark.
From hummingbird trumpet, the sphinx moth twitches away,
and the night's distant fluttering is like sea water
flooding the workings of your father's watch, or as when he called
out to you from a lone ironwood tree

and you rose from an uneasy sleep to run barefoot
and terrified to his voice. Inside the thorny mass, his hands
held a buff-collared nightjar tangled in the branches.
His fingers beneath the flashlight spread the dead-leaf patterns
of a wing. *This*, he said, *is a mystery*, and he bloodied
his wrists to free it from the thorns— where, tonight, you find
yourself pushing through the brambles to a house,

hollow and beached in its yard. The last of the powder light
ripens around the weathered riggings, and beyond the gate,
a cluster of trees you cannot name compels you to enter
their world of murmuring birds. Each tree a family,
a hemisphere of dozing quail. At your step,
into rivulets of stars, penumbral boughs
with startled wings, they scatter.

Cazorla

Taking off your shirt in that strange little room
overlooking the valley at dusk, the woven terrain,
olive groves, frail vineyards, I remember
the wispy tails of control burning. On the gentle slope
of your breast, you had tattooed a bright fish,
flame red with long whiskers and a man's face.
We were making a mistake together
in a sandy bed by an open window,
the only view in the small rooming house
of seasonal laborers. We had been
holed up together for a week, waiting
for friends from Madrid. We were bored walking
through the village, the blue electric streetlights,
the tall quick glasses of Alcazar beer,
the men, dusty from beating the olives
from the trees. They watched us with a tired ardor,
their backs to the bar. You put your cold hands
into my pockets and wanted to go back to the room.
I wanted to ask about the fish I
nuzzled with my mouth, but you asked me to stop
and listen for a second to the bats
that lived in the cliffs surrounding the fields.
I heard only the spring flowing from the moss
and rocks that fed the sea-bound Guadalquivir,
the river that carried nightmare, the first
conquistadors. I woke up cold with the smoldering fields.
You were coughing and putting on a sweater,
wanting coffee and cigarettes. The friends
arrived, and we crowded the little tavern
with English. The subject of piercing and
painting came up, and I slipped
from our noise into the street, found our river
and sat listening with the bats at the mouth
of a mule trail and a spring, while you told
your story of a wise fish that wrestled
a fisherman who had lost his faith far at sea.

Semana Santa: Procesión de Silencio

A crowd of twenty thousand
buries the moon.
Children dressed like sailors
on their papas' shoulders
block the light above.
Hooded *penitentes* and their candles
glide by under a dark cross.

The plaza breathes
and moves their feet.
Prayers misfire in my head
as thirty flames float
through limbs and coats.

A perfumed shadow
puts a hand on my neck
and mistakes me for her husband.
"Quédate," she whispers,
"Quédate quieto."

Feverscape

Florence, Arizona

Lightning splits the pepper tree outside
my window, its halves flapping sparks against
power lines. The night begins in a harvest
of harlequin bugs and velvet ants where
once eggplants and chilis swelled like blisters.
Fields harbor strange cats and search lights

fanning into the empty dust. The lights
must be looking for an inmate outside
the razor wire. Tonight my blistered
body crops up in a canal against
the main spillway's rusty grates, where
river water trickles and harvesters

fling alfalfa dregs and dust-- a harvest
of spores and strains of valley fever-- light
enough to travel entire counties. Where
can you hide in a barren field, outside
of digging a hole into the blight? Against
the tractor leans a broken and blistered

eucalyptus. Monsoons of dust blister
the wallpaper, the witless flag, harvesting
scrub and shallow rooted trees. Against
the dark backdrop of storm, prison lights
scour the void, and they will find me outside
chain-link, beyond aqueducts, where

vultures have begun on the mind. Where
can anyone hide in this world? Blister
beetles riddle sheets and my dreams. Outside,
the prison looks as empty as harvest.
I hear a distant alarm and tumble lightly
through search and thunder. The dog against

the house thumps a frightened tail, and against
my better judgment, I let him in. Where
would I try to run? The tree flicking light
through gauzy curtain wisps blisters
my tongue. Gusts sway the house, and a harvesting
owl drops upon a shadow's plot. Outside,

blistering holes against the blight, where
we hide inside gated worlds, where I harvest
and sweat beneath tower light, I step outside.

Swimmers

A dog, a deck of cards, and eight ball
side pocket—clean,

which means the ball touches nothing on its way to the
hole in the sand the player falls into, where,

on this piece of paper, you have begun to answer
the counselor who brings you

your shallow paper cup and pen . *write for me—*
he reminds you—*and this is not*

a test—ten things you value most—
priorities, he calls them,
the stars, for one,

that you cannot see from here,
that cannot leave their obligations to no one,

even when two brothers
--in the back of a pickup

driven by a drunk father—
gaze at them: tack holes, lost and random

that when connected
are called Hercules, Scorpius, Crux,

bottles rolling
back to us in the truck bed on turns,

headlights from oncoming freight,
narrow lanes...

>>>

and I was afraid. Add that
fear to the list, add the dog

that dug beneath the chicken wire

and into the summer squash,

add that morning my brother ran with it in his arms

to hide it from the ax, add the father

behind the ax who made me

fetch a switch for my brother,

add the eucalyptus I climbed
hoping I would disappear into its branches...

then I'd consider the sky a priority I climbed into,
whose illusory buckling of air the heat evoked

reminded me of flashbacks on sitcoms. I thought
the Phoenix sky would make everything

a dream, or at least a memory I could later be grateful for,

but the world only grew sharper: the swamp cooler rattle,
doves in teardrop leaves, murky pools in yards,

windows and brick behind which
I knew my father had the dog and my brother

And down with a whip
like he had asked,

>>>

you are falling, but not far,

onto a sandy shelf inside
a spent mine you didn't know existed,

that you wish were merely a trope,
not a place where the sky is a fissure—

this clearing of dust and moonlight.
You have shot a thousand rattlesnakes
whose heads now float in baby jars

because they fit there
so that we may see their eyes

looking at nothing
in the formaldehyde murk,

and you have shot your share of mockingbirds
in mid-gaze to be here—
beneath a patch of Earth that has given way

>>>

now holding still as a fugitive's fingers, your brother's fingers
are bridging a pool cue

the day he took the five thousand dollars the recruiter gave him
and abandoned boot camp in Oklahoma.

He wanted to see the Pacific and kept saying today had been
the greatest of days.

On the lam, he said, *you notice everything*,

and come San Bernadino and a dust storm,
his attention ran out. San Bernadino,

and it was getting late. He had hoped to throw himself

into the water and to keep going,
but he confessed he would, at best,

throw his hemostats into the waves

before turning himself in,
and when he left them

hanging like gut from an elk antler,
you shot the game out alone,

taking your time on the eight,
thinking of him that morning:

weak stars surrendering to the west, and dawn exploding
in his mirror and in the glass of the trucks

and in the bottles— the chiming Indonesian parade
he carried inside him.

>>>

The faces of trigger fish
are not our faces,
but they are faces
born as arrows,
as glass-eyed
trajectories

now in heaps
 upon the deck—one fish
 turns itself over
 in the alien air,
 and you have
 another eye—nearly
 another fish,
 and the father's
 one good eye
 bids us
 clean these changelings
 pumping nothing
 in the sunlight;
 a day's sail from nowhere,
 near a rock in the Sea of Cortez
 named Monserrat,
 the boat adrift,

 sharp jib shadows
 drawing slowly as a blade in the worthless air.

>>>

At dawn, Quonset huts were burning in alfalfa fields,
 in some side drama exhausting itself beyond the mile markers.

Add fiberglass, add oxygen,
 add all that luxuriates in an inevitable absence.

>>>

Again, add the father,	a red face card,
who is speaking	over his shoulder
in a jack's regalia,	his one good eye
commanding you	to swallow the fish
	at the bottom of the cup

 that are sometimes there,
 and that are other times
 hard to find

inside the lithium hum of the ward, where the brother lying next to you in the sleeping bag must
 circulate a bulwark of chemicals to keep the silence of the cards in his hands, where there is one boy
 in the back of the truck. One shooter at the table all night. Talking to himself.

>>>

Add the brother that isn't there, a swimming pool,
one son, one father, who, in a sway of dust and spores,

slips into the water and throws weak circles
around his failing body.

As he reaches the edge closest to you,

add the moment
a stranger surfaces

and invites you in.

Thirsty Ghazal

From the dam comes a diverted trickle—a lifeblood gone,
and at the Turf Cantina, the sign reads: *BE GOOD OR BE GONE*.

A dust storm opens my door, and upon creosote tresses, she sets
half the desert upon my chest: *there will be no flood*, and she's gone.

The abandoned dog track rises in the sandy flats. Above rows
of empty seats, it whispers from a flapping metal hood: *be gone*.

Into the water park's chlorinated depths, our children slip
from the mouths of bug-eyed pirates and toads and are gone.

Padre Kino drove his desert slaves to craft a grand abstraction
from cottonwood: a ship. Both people and cottonwoods are gone.

Planet of the Apes was filmed on Lake Powell. Across miles of tap
water, the astronauts paddle like alien driftwood and are gone.

Moonrise at Wukoki

Saddled without rider the mare followed us to the ruins,
and the crater-scarred moons shifted in her haunches as she walked.

The high walls opened to the sky, and the earthen floor held me before
row upon row of stacked and mortared stones, everything ending in stars.

They buried their dead in the floors. I've cared about few graves,
their square stones, names sunk into the wet grass, until now.

We were brave to make love in the rock walls, and the cold fell on my back
from Cassiopeia's Chair. Perhaps the bones of a child held us in place.

We resisted making stories about the horse and marveled at her
careful and curious strides in the scrub, and we drove away in silence.

*Take the blanket to the great room. I remember. You left the shutter open
to expose the arriving moon. I'll meet you there.*

When the Water Leaves

After bedtime, the boy forgets something, a bike left on its side
in the scrub behind the yard, plastic soldiers left in the arroyo, loose ends
that keep him up and send him into the desert to gather the pieces in his pajamas
and sneakers, and there, beneath a degree of moon and shadow, he finds his father
moving a chair well into the night on the edge of the property, a voice, the ember
of a mail order cigar in a shadow's hand, the surrender of ice in the bourbon.

The boy continues to forget and doesn't sleep, even when the chair grows
empty, and the house fills with standing strangers and covered dishes,
dress shoes strike the tiles after the service, the minister's hand arrives,
the garden falls into itself from neglect, the chair behind the fence fades
in the heat, the water table drops, the mountains beyond the yard sprout transmitters,
and the horizons brown with homes and roads. He is awake with the sound.

When the water leaves, what remains is for the taking. The tide will never come back in,
and the moon moves through an Earth gone brittle beneath his feet, a desert
of seeds without edges, a powder beneath tires, a color under the finger nails
of landscapers, an irritation in the throats of bulldozers. The desert has become a dust
that keeps the eyes from ever crying. He can hear the television sets
of his neighbors, the radios behind car windows, someone coughing in a kitchen.

He is awake behind the yard and builds a basket with what dies:
a cowboy's barbed wire, the hair of a pony struck by lightning,

cottonwood root, mesquite, a dried strand of yucca, his father's
leather belt, old pajamas, creosote, a scratchy strand

of lawn chair, Christmas lights pulled from the tree, a hip bone
that plagued a German shepherd, a strip of sail from a sunk catamaran,

the feather of a bird he'll never see again. From the debris of a vanished tide,
he builds a basket with what dies and shoulders it off the property.